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ABSTRACT

Although elections are an annual theme in many social studies classrooms, presidential election years prompt increased interest among students in the electoral process and offer an opportunity to teach about a national election as it happens. This ERIC Digest describes the legal requirements and traditions of U.S. presidential elections, processes by which people seek and gain the office of president, and resources for teaching about presidential elections including: requirements and traditions of presidential elections; becoming President of the United States; World Wide Web resources for teaching about presidential elections; and the 2000 U.S. presidential election. (LB)

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Teaching about Presidential Elections

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Although elections are an annual theme in many social studies classrooms, presidential election years prompt increased interest among students in the electoral process and offer an opportunity to teach about a national election as it happens. This ERIC Digest describes legal and extralegal requirements and traditions of presidential elections, processes by which people seek and gain the office of president, and resources for teaching about presidential elections.

Requirements and Traditions of Presidential Elections. Americans elect their president through a combination of custom, state law, and constitutional requirement such as the electoral college as specified in Article II, Sections 2 and 4 and Amendment 12. Furthermore, Article II, Section 5 plus Amendments 20 and 23 of the United States Constitution pertain to election of the president. The following statements describe the presidential election system in the United States.

- A president must be at least 35 years old, a natural born citizen, and a resident of the United States for a minimum of 14 years.
- A president is elected by delegates to the electoral college (i.e., electors), not directly by the people.
- In each state, each party on the ballot selects electors equal to that state's number of senators and representatives in Congress (in addition to three delegates from the District of Columbia, as secured by the passage of the Twenty-Third Amendment).
- Eligible voters in each state and the District of Columbia vote for a presidential candidate on the designated election day, or they cast absentee ballots if they are out of the state on the official election day: these are the popular votes.
- Entire slates of electors are pledged to each of the presidential nominees in every state (except Maine, where special presidential elector districts allocate delegates) so that the winner of the state's popular vote, even a plurality winner, takes all of the electoral votes of a state (even though the Constitution does not require electors to vote for the candidate receiving the most popular votes in the general election).
- Electors cast ballots in their state capitals the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December (the electoral college never convenes as an entire body).
- Ballots are sent to Washington and counted before a joint session of the new Congress on January 6.
- If no candidate wins a majority of electors in the electoral college (i.e., 51 percent or 270 electoral votes), then the election of the president goes to the House of Representatives, where each state casts one vote, determined by the state's representatives, among the five highest-ranking candidates, and the election of the vice president goes to the Senate, where every member casts one vote for one of the two highest-ranking candidates.
- If the House of Representatives fails to elect a president by majority vote before the president's scheduled inauguration on January 20, then the vice president-elect "shall act as President until a president shall have qualified" (Twentieth Amendment).
- The president-elect is sworn in on January 20.

Unable to foresee development of political parties and a two-party system, most delegates to the Constitutional Convention believed the electoral college would fail frequently to produce a majority, thus throwing the election of the president into the House of Representatives. Only the presidential elections of 1800 and 1824, however, did not yield a majority in the electoral college. Yet, because of the winner-take-all system, in 17 of 52 presidential elections a candidate won without attracting a majority of the popular vote. Moreover, John Quincy Adams (1824), Rutherford B. Hayes (1876), and Benjamin Harrison (1888) were elected despite receiving fewer popular votes than their opponents.

Becoming President of the United States. In addition to the formal requirements listed above, Americans typically elect a president who meets unwritten criteria such as leadership in one of the two major parties, foreign policy experience, moral standing, and extensive experience in running for and gaining political office. Although millions of Americans are legally eligible to run for the nation's highest elected office, people who have experience in politics, especially as governors and members of Congress, have a decided advantage. Sixteen former governors and 24 former members of one or both houses of Congress have served as president. Of the two leading presidential candidates in 2000, George W. Bush is a state governor and Albert Gore Jr. has served in both houses of Congress.

Serious candidates for president must begin preparing for the election years in advance. The first decision potential candidates and their families face is whether or not they are suited for the demands of the office and willing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to win the election. The next step usually involves forming political action committees to broaden a candidate's visibility, to test the candidate's appeal nationwide, and to raise money for increasingly expensive campaigns. Candidates also establish exploratory committees whose job it is to 1) seriously consider the candidate's chances of becoming president, 2) suggest possible campaigns themes and slogans, 3) write speeches and position papers, 4) seek endorsements from

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powerful individuals and groups, 5) recruit professional and volunteer staff, 6) begin organizing state campaigns in key states, 7) hire pollsters and consultants, and 8) develop media appeals.

For candidates who make it through these initial stages, the next step is announcing formally their candidacy and entering their party's series of caucuses and primaries. Presidential caucuses and primaries differ from state to state, as do the rules and qualifications for getting on the ballot. Generally, a state presidential caucus is a multilayered system of meetings usually attracting only dedicated party members who elect delegates to represent them in the next stage of the election process. There are two types of state primaries. In the first type, voters directly vote for the person they want to nominate for the presidency. In the second type, voters elect delegates to the national nominating convention. Since 1956 these state contests have determined each party's nominee for the presidency. Traditionally, Iowa conducts the first caucus and New Hampshire the first primary, giving these two smaller states significant influence over the process.

National party conventions are held in late July or August before the fall presidential campaign to nominate the candidates for president and vice-president and approve the party platforms, each party's stated goals for the next four years. Until direct primaries became popular in states during the twentieth century, these national conventions were extremely important in the presidential election process. Because Americans usually know a party's presidential nominee and platform before the convention, their importance in recent years has diminished. Still, conventions are important to nominees because they help solidify party support.

After the national party conventions, candidates are focused fully on the general election, held the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. During the campaign for the general election candidates must decide the best strategy for winning the general election. Typically, candidates must decide which issues and sections of the country to emphasize, how much and what kinds of advertising to buy, how to collaborate with other interested groups to broaden support, and how to reorganize their campaigns at the state and local levels (Nelson 1994, 140). With every decision, a candidate also must consider the likely responses from other candidates.

If the general election produces a majority in the electoral college for a presidential and vice-presidential ticket, then these candidates are known as the president-elect and vice-president elect until taking office on January 20 of the following year. Although many view the system by which Americans elect their president as odd or even antiquated, to date there has not been a serious effort to change it.

World Wide Web Resources for Teaching about Presidential Elections. The following World Wide Web sites are recommended as valuable resources for teachers and students.

Kids Voting USA. This acclaimed nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots organization works with schools and communities to enhance civic education and provide youth a voting experience at official polls on election day. Independent research has confirmed the value of Kids Voting USA, and K-12 educators who wish to actively engage students in learning about elections should consider using this program. This well-organized site provides an overview of the program, information about how to use it, teacher- and student-only domains, and a newsletter. *http://kidsvotingusa.org/*

The American President: Election 2000. Part of the companion site to PBS's monumental series *The American President*, Election 2000 is designed to help teachers and students track the emerging themes, events, and personalities of the 2000 presidential elections. A student magazine, presidential biographies, and lesson plans for teaching about the presidency are available at this site.
http://www.americanpresident.org/election2000.htm

Issues2000: Every Candidate on Every Issue. This nonpartisan site tracks the positions of the Republican, Democratic, Reform, Libertarian, Green, Natural Law, and Constitution party candidates on a wide variety of important issues and policy debates. *http://issues2000.org/*

Federal Election Commission: Guide for Citizens. Part of the official site of the Federal Election Commission, this site is designed for anyone wishing to learn more about financing campaigns for federal office, the rules and regulations of financing, and elections and voting in general. *http://www.fec.gov/citizen_guide.html*

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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